

From the Archives: The Story of the Edinburgh Bibliographical Society

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To go back thirty-eight years. On a December day in 1889 I called upon Mr George Waterston (Junior, then) (**see figures 7 and 8**), and, as my call was on business, I was rather taken aback when he jumped up, exclaiming, 'The very man! the very man!' To my puzzled question of his meaning, he answered that he had been worrying about a Secretary for a proposed Bibliographical Society. 'Now,' he added, 'I have found him'. I was not so sure of this, but I promised to consider the matter after studying the draft of a circular which he handed to me. This was the first I knew of the matter.

The circular I have here, and I will read it from the unique copy in my possession, as its distribution was the first step taken in founding this Society:

EDINBURGH BIBLIOGRAPHIC SOCIETY IN CONNECTION WITH THE PHILOSOPHICAL INSTITUTION.

It has been proposed that a BIBLIOGRAPHIC SOCIETY should be formed – the Membership to consist, in the first place, of Members of the Philosophical Institution. As the subject is an important one in Edinburgh, a suggestion has been made that the Membership should not be so limited; and, before calling a meeting to constitute the Society, it has been determined to ascertain what support can be looked for outside the Membership.

Names of gentlemen who would wish to join such a Society will be received, by post-card or otherwise, by Mr Carfrae, the Librarian at the Institution, and due notice will be given of the first meeting. As the Institution affords facilities in rooms for meetings, &c., the expense of the proposed Society will be nominal

The objects of the Society will be:

The Reading of Papers and Discussion of Subjects connected with Books, and for Mutual Assistance in such directions as the Bibliography of Writers of Note, Special Subjects, Localities, Publishers, Printers, &c. The Exhibition of Rare or Remarkable Books.

Notices of eminent Collectors and Collections of Books, Celebrated Book Sales, eminent Printers and Publishers, notable Catalogues, and subjects connected with Typography and Bookbinding.

While it is hoped important Papers may be contributed on such subjects, the meetings will be often of a colloquial character.

It is suggested that prominence should be given to subjects connected with Scotland, and that Papers connected with Scottish Bibliography should be preserved in the Library of the Institution for reference, and as a basis of continuous work.

This statement of the objects is interesting by way of comparison of the original ideal with what has grown out of it. The response to the appeal was so satisfactory that a circular, subscribed 'G. W., Jr, *Sec. Pro tem.*' calling a meeting for 16 January 1890 was issued, the business stated being the constituting of the Society, the election of office-bearers, and a conversation on books exhibited. A note was appended asking gentlemen to 'oblige by



Figure 7: G.P. Johnston, secretary of the Society 1890-1932.

placing on the table any curious or rare books likely to interest the Society'. The circular is evidence of Mr Waterston's faith in his cause and of his desire to get early to work; but it does suggest to me the lines: 'Had you seen these roads before they were made/You would lift up your hands and bless General Wade'.

Mr Waterston's confidence was justified, and his expectation of entertainment rewarded. The Society *was* constituted; and a number of interesting books *were* circulated for inspection. Mr Archibald Constable, of gracious memory, presided

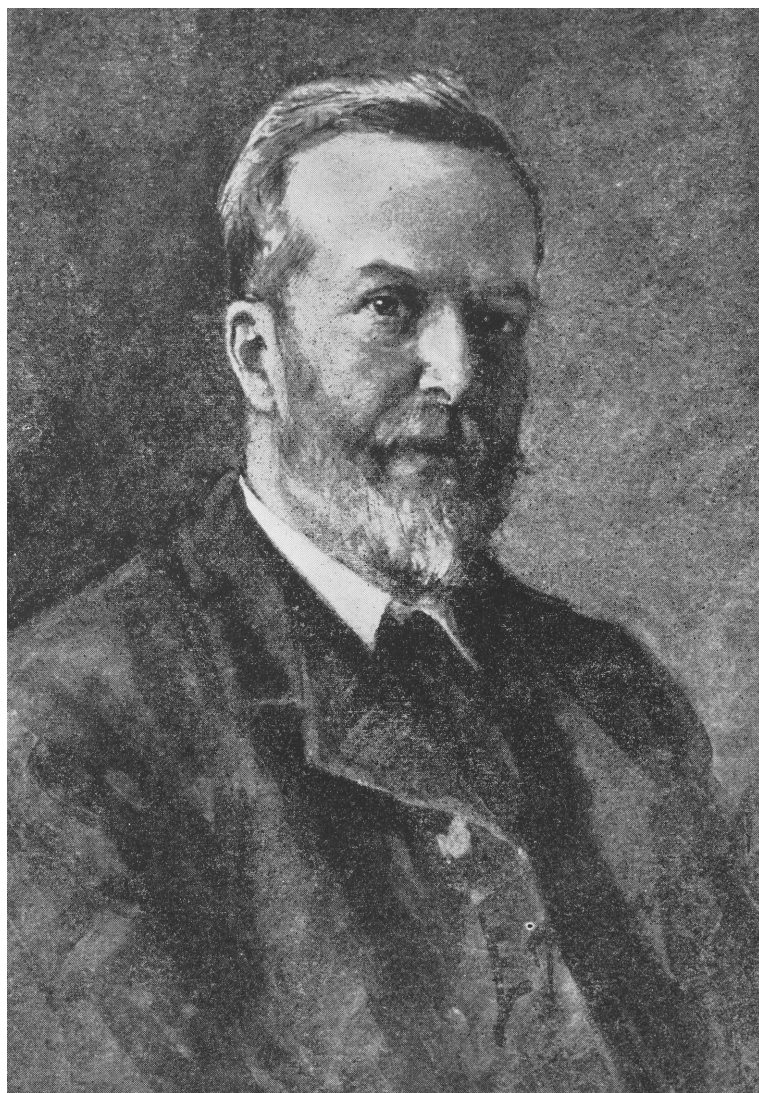


Figure 8: Portrait of George Waterston (1838-1922), printer and stationer, founder of the Society.

over an attendance of thirty, and several apologies for absence were read. In the course of an address Mr Constable said that the meeting was a good augury of the success of such a Society, the idea of which originated with Mr Waterston. He spoke of the need of such a Society, indicated the lines on which it might work, and expressed his belief that under the guidance of those who were professional bibliographers it might attempt and achieve useful work of permanent value. Mr Constable would not have liked to be called a prophet; but I think you will admit that he was a good seer. A committee of six was elected, the first President being Mr Constable, the Vice-President Mr Graves Law, and the other Members of Committee – Mr Waterston, Mr Cowan, Mr John Baxter, and your first (and perennial) Secretary, Mr Waterston's 'very man'. To this Committee was remitted the task of framing a draft of the Constitution and Rules. It was decided to hold the meetings once a fortnight, from November to March, and the Chairman was authorised to request from the Directors of the Philosophical Institution a room without rent for the first Session.

The minutes of this meeting occupy five quarto pages and might be interesting to those who consider that the minutes of the present day are so curt as to remind them of Tacitus's method of writing history. On the other hand, Dr Graves Law described them as being more a report of the meeting than a bare record of its proceedings. To him I pleaded ignorance of such work, but today I am rather glad of their fullness, because they show that at the very beginning the keynote of the tune the Society was to play was struck.

The Committee set to work on the Constitution and Rules, but it took six meetings – two of Committee and four of the Society – to consider them fit for adoption on 13 March 1890. It may be interesting to know that the name of the Society caused considerable talk. The name as in the circular – Edinburgh Bibliographic Society – was at first accepted, but at a Members' meeting following, it was changed, and curiously enough, on the motion of Mr Waterston himself, to the Scottish Bibliographic Society. I objected strongly to *Scottish* in the name, as seeming to imply that our work would be confined to Scottish subjects. Mr Constable and Mr Law agreed, and at the next meeting the name as it stands today was adopted. I rather favoured 'The Bibliographical Society' *tout court* and have sometimes regretted its non-adoption; because London now has it – a title which suggests what ours *is*, the first Society of its kind. Mr Gordon Duff was of the same mind, but he was not at the naming. Naturally, we never thought of London taking example from Edinburgh. The membership of the Society was limited to seventy. One curious omission had been made – the appointment of a Treasurer. As a Committee of six had been elected, there was a difficulty. Finally, it was resolved that the Secretary should also be Treasurer. I hope this decision was wise. Personally I have found it very convenient, and comfortable, not to be hampered by a Chancellor of the Exchequer!

At this stage the members on the roll numbered sixty-three. At two subsequent meetings seven more were elected, and the Septuagint was completed on 6 November 1890, its strength resting in Messrs Constable, Graves Law, Waterston, Cowan, Blaikie, Aldis, Macmath, Rae Macdonald, John S. Gibb, Johnston, John Scott, Lord Rosebery, and the Rev. John

Sturrock. In the earlier years the membership was greatly changed, and at the close of the eighth session, 1896, no fewer than thirty-five members had resigned, and four had died. But the vacancies were filled as they occurred, the Society profiting by the accession of Professor Ferguson, Mr Gordon Duff, Bishop Dowden, the Earl of Crawford, Mr Francis Jenkinson, Mr A. W. Pollard, Mr W. B. Wilson and Mr Hay Fleming, and, as a corresponding Member, Mr J. P. Edmond, who was elected an ordinary member in 1904 in place of his predecessor in the Signet Library, Dr Graves Law, who died in that year. Mr Edmond was elected President in the following session. On 14 December he delivered an address in which he made some suggestions for widening the scope and operations of the Society, and at the next meeting he read a Paper contributed by Mr Robert Steele of the London Society. At the next we had sorrowfully to record his death. The loss of Dr Graves Law and Mr Edmond was a serious one for the Society.

In the nineteen sessions from 1896 to 1914 there were many changes. We lost by death twenty-two members and by resignation thirteen. The vacancies were filled up as they occurred by (among others) Messrs Scott Macfie, Erskine Beveridge, and Sir Arthur Mitchell, Dr W. K. Dickson, Dr Kellas Johnstone, Mr F. C. Nicholson and Mr. Sutherland Ferguson and by a foursome from the west, Messrs William Stewart, J. C. Ewing, J. J. Spencer and J. D. Ogilvie. In that period we had also for two sessions a lady member. It is not advisable to bring this sketch down to more recent years. Some sessions after 1914 were very trying, and it is painful to go back on them. The list of deaths is a long and a very sad one. Among the real workers I may mention Archibald Constable, Aldis, Macmath, Waterston, Jenkinson, Gordon Duff, Rae Macdonald and P. J. Anderson, who left blanks which it seemed could never be filled. One incident only of this period I shall mention. In 1922 the membership dropped to fifty-six. I sent out an S.O.S. appeal. The Society took shame to itself, and on 14 December eight new members were admitted *en bloc*. . .

The meetings every fortnight were considered too frequent, and at the next annual meeting (November 1894) it was decided to meet once a month, with a business meeting in addition, on the first Thursday of November.[. . .] In 1898 a motion on behalf of Mr Pollard was made that 'selected Public Libraries may become (subject to the approval of the Committee) subscribers to the Publications on payment of the subscription'. A direct negative was moved, and the matter was remitted to the Committee. The proposal was strenuously opposed. The Committee sustained the objection, but adopted my suggestion that copies of the papers should be presented, for preservation, to the British Museum and Advocates Libraries, and at the annual meeting a clause to that effect was inserted in the minutes. The next alteration was made twenty years later, owing to the gradual decrease of attendance at the Annual Business Meeting, at which only a sense of duty could secure the presence of a member. At some meetings so few members were present that they had to do double duty in the formal proposing and seconding of office-bearers. This was remedied by a resolution to hold the Business Meeting on the same night

as the first Ordinary Meeting. [...] The next change was made in 1920, when the subscription was increased from half a guinea to a whole one.

Now, gentlemen, I am under promise to speak about the work of the Society. It should be enough to point to thirteen handsome volumes and say, 'What need of speech?' But it is not. These volumes indeed can speak for themselves, but other work has been done. Many of the papers read at the meetings were not intended to be printed. Others were obtained on condition that they should not be printed by the Society. Several of these have been published elsewhere, and others – those, for example, of Mr Rae Macdonald and Mr Lyell – were developed and appeared later as portly volumes. There have also been exhibitions of rare books, manuscripts, and bindings. Prominent among these were the selections from the Haigh Hall Library of our member, Lord Crawford, shown by Mr Edmond, and from the collections of Mr Gordon Duff and others. And I might mention the recent lantern-slide exhibitions of historical documents and other MSS by Mr Cunningham and Dr Dickson.

The idea of practical work was from the very beginning instilled in our minds and fostered and exemplified by Mr Graves Law, Mr Cowan, Mr Aldis, and Mr. Gordon Duff in particular. That of the earlier days was necessarily tentative, but in the third session a forward step was taken, and from considering what *might* or *could* be done, a circular was issued, pointing out what *should* be done and what was being attempted. The circular contained a list of subjects already undertaken (e.g., Publications of Scottish Local Presses) and the members who had volunteered to take charge of the various sections. A hand list of Andro Hart's prints was issued with the circular, and members were invited to supply the full titles and collations of specified items as well as to add to the list. The issue of similar lists was discontinued, partly from lack of support due to dying enthusiasm; but one of the subjects – Watson's Press – has been kept in working order by myself. There are ninety short titles in the list (or rather sixty-five, for twenty-five are not Watson's printing and were included by Mr Gibb's mistaking 'sold by' for 'printed by'). To these sixty-five I have added 185, besides completing nearly all the titles and bibliographies.² I may say, too, that I have made from time to time additions to the Queen Mary and Darien bibliographies which should some day be printed. Two of the subjects listed in the circular took many years to finish. One, 'The Holyrood Press', by Mr Cowan, was not completed till fourteen years after, when it was printed in Volume VI of the Papers. The other is the 'Bibliography of the Book of Common Order', also Mr Cowan's, which was finished twenty years after and printed as part of volume X. An interesting fact connected with it is worth noting in view of the natural disinclination to print a bibliography before being somewhat assured of its completeness. When the work was at press, Mr Aldis received for inspection from Mr Cosmo Gordon an edition of the Book of Common Order printed by Andro Hart in 1615. Besides being unknown, it proved to Mr Cowan to be of special interest on account of its having bound in it 112 leaves of music in manuscript bearing the date '2 Aprile 1626' and the signature of E. Millar, who harmonized the tunes in the complete edition of 1635.

Another important work was proposed by Mr Aldis in 1895, suggested by the unsatisfactory quality of the facsimiles in Dickson and Edmond's *Annals of Scottish Printing*, executed by not very skilful hands when process work was in its infancy. [...] In June of that year, a circular was issued explaining the proposal to issue a 'Series of Facsimiles illustrative of the History of Scottish Printing from its commencement to 1640, forming a full and reliable collection of specimens for reference and comparative study'. Mr Aldis came up from Cambridge for the purpose, and he and I spent a week in the Advocates and University Libraries selecting ornaments and portions of pages for reproduction. We had these photographed, and he framed a scheme of the first part of the work. But the response to the circular from outside was not sufficient to warrant the Society with its small income going on with the work at the time. Later, a member guaranteed £100 towards the cost, but by this time Aldis was deeply engaged in his own Library work, and his leisure time was fully occupied with the *List*. After the printing of his *List*, eye-trouble and other causes necessitated his doing as little sedentary work as possible. Then the end came. I turned over all the material to Gordon Duff who had undertaken to write the introduction and the descriptive notes. Then he died. Mr Scott Macfie, his executor, sent the box of the photographs, MSS, etc. to me. It is preserved in the archives of the Society, awaiting the man who will do the work.

By 1901 five volumes of the Papers had been issued. These included Mr Scott's Queen Mary Bibliography, largely paid for by himself, and Mr Erskine Beveridge's Bibliography of Dunfermline and the West of Fife, which he presented to the Society. Both works show what can be accomplished in the leisure time of very busy men. Then came Aldis's *List of Books printed in Scotland before 1700*, the first instalment of the really great work which the Society had set itself to do, and which is still in progress.

In going over the minutes of these first fourteen years nothing struck me more than the almost entire absence of Aldis's name. Yet from the very first meeting he was an influence and power in the Society such as no other member could be said to be. All through these years he had been quietly and unobtrusively working on the *List*, and, with the help of Mr Cowan and myself, amassing titles and arranging them for printing. I should like to pay tribute before this Society to the native modesty and self-effacing spirit of one who was a marvel of versatile gifts, and who stood head and shoulders above men of great reputations. Differing in many things, we were congenial and close fellow-workers for many years and always very dear friends. Before the *List* was printed, fifty had been added to the 3500 mentioned in the prospectus. To this end I had [worked] in the Advocates Library from 10 to 4 on many a day when I 'oughtn't to have', and had a big share in the shaping of the volume, especially in fighting for and obtaining a single line entry, when possible, for each title, and a chronological instead of an alphabetical arrangement of the titles as was proposed. This involved a great addition to Aldis's labour, both in the revision of the titles, and the necessity for an alphabetical index. How great anyone may realise if he tries to boil down the title of a seventeenth century tract intelligibly and get it and five other

important pieces of information into one line. All the work on the *List* was Aldis's, yet when he sent me the proposed title-page he had both our names as authors on it. This I would not allow, especially as his name as sole author would help him professionally. Then, to make amends, he entered in the preface an extravagant laudation of my assistance, which I deleted, only stipulating for an acknowledgment of services in increasing the entries. My reward came; for, his work being recognized at its worth, the University of Cambridge bestowed on him the honorary degree of M.A. Some time after this, when I was visiting him, we were discussing additions to the *List*. 'That reminds me, Johnston', he said, 'that I ought to have owned up to you long ago about your chronological and one-line arrangements. I gladly admit that you were in the right and am thankful you got the better of me'. Then he added, 'And I still regret that both our names are not on that title'. This shows the man.

In 1904 the *List* was issued. Besides the Members' copies, three hundred were printed on ordinary paper with wide margins. Seventy of these were given to the members of the Society who each had subscribed twenty-five shillings towards the cost. About a hundred were presented to selected libraries in Great Britain, America, and the Continent, and others interested in such work, accompanied by a request for notes of any work found by the recipient not to be in the *List*. I do not think more than a dozen or two notes were received. The Secretary certainly never got even one. Thirty-five copies were sent out for review. The remainder were allowed to be sold, and the returns went some way to paying for the book. The original estimate was £100. With all the additions made after the estimate was given in, the actual cost, including charges for distribution, was only £140. The *List* is only a preliminary, issued to help the completion of the *Bibliography of Books printed in Scotland before 1700*. Additions have been made to this in the course of the last quarter of a century amounting to nearly a thousand titles. At a recent meeting of the Committee I was asked to try to finish the work and have it printed without delay. When it will be done, I cannot say. Since 1904 the completion of the titles and bibliographies of the books has been in progress. There are 3919 titles in the *List*; of these there are now 1760 complete, leaving 2159 for further investigation. Of additions to the *List* there are, as I have said, about a thousand. Some six hundred have been completed. In all, about 2500 have still to be done; but many of these can be obtained from Dickson and Edmond's *Annals of Scottish Printing*, Edmond's *Aberdeen Printers*, and several of the Society's Papers. How many more additions may be obtained cannot even be guessed at, but a search of the Edinburgh University Catalogue, and the London Bibliographical Society's recently issued *Short-Title Catalogue* would probably have a good result. I took over the control of the work from Aldis in 1910; long before I had had to give up going to the Advocates Library during the very hours when my own business required most attention, and the additions made to the *List* have mostly been secured from many large private libraries. You may have been surprised at my mention of the late Lord Rosebery's name among the members who constituted the strength of the Society, as few knew of his lordship's having

any rather special interest in it. But he had vicariously; for I obtained several hundred additions to the *List* from his collection of rare early printed Scottish books and tracts, now, I am happy to say, by Lord Rosebery's generosity, in the National Library of Scotland. I very nearly forgot to mention a matter in connection with the collection of these titles. It has a sordid smack, but the members should know of it. From first to last this part of the work has been accomplished without any expense to the Society, except for a few pounds for stationery and postages.

This, the greatest work of the Society is still to be accomplished – a full bibliographical list of books and tracts from the early Scottish presses. Such work as has been done is worthy of it. I hope that the names of the members who contributed to that work will long be remembered with gratitude.³

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Printed in *Publications of the Edinburgh Bibliographical Society*, XV, *Papers of the Edinburgh Bibliographical Society* (1930-35), pp. 77-86. Reprinted separately 1934.

2. A bibliography of Watson (with 506 entries) was published in 1982: D. Wyn Evans, 'James Watson of Edinburgh: A Bibliography of Works from his Press 1795-1722', *Edinburgh Bibliographical Society Transactions*, V, part 2.

3. H.G. Aldis, *A List of Books Printed in Scotland Before 1700* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh Bibliographical Society, 1904). Revised edition (Edinburgh: NLS, 1970). An updated online version of Aldis is in progress at the NLS with 2008 the target date for completion of the final 1661-1700 section: <http://www.nls.uk/catalogues/resources/scotbooks> [accessed 22 August 2006]